



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

## A Different War on Terrorism: The U.S., Turkey and the PKK

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Founded on Marxist principles, the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party) is considered a terrorist organization by the Turkish and U.S. governments, as well as the E.U. It began its armed campaign for Kurdish independence in 1984, and it is estimated that approximately 40,000 lives have been lost as a result of the PKK's insurgency. Weakened after the capture of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999, the PKK declared a ceasefire and partially withdrew into Northern Iraq. The organization has since called off its ceasefire and increased its militant attacks, particularly since March 2006. Turkey fears that an independent Kurdistan emerging from the Iraq conflict would embolden separatist aspirations within its own Kurdish population. With approximately 14 million Turkish Kurds, Turkey is home to the largest Kurdish population in the world. Turkey has been a vocal advocate for Iraq's territorial integrity, fearing that any federal structure would lead to an independent Kurdistan.

Fighting the Kurdistan workers' Party (PKK) has never been one of the top priorities of U.S. foreign, security or defense policy. For Turkey, it is the defining terrorist threat to the country and fighting it has been a top priority for decades. As Turkish military and government officials often say, the PKK is to Turkey what Al-Qaida is to the U.S., or that "the PKK is Turkey's Al-Qaida." Indeed, both the U.S. State Department and the European Union designate the group as a foreign terrorist organization. Despite this, Turkish military and government officials have often lamented that Turkey is being left alone to face its version of the war on terrorism, particularly by the U.S., while it has participated in the U.S.-led global war on terrorism.

Given the high priority attached to this issue in Turkey, Turkish public perceptions of the U.S. are directly linked to the U.S.' stance on the PKK issue, and these sentiments eventually factor into the Turkey's stance against the U.S. on other issues as well. Whenever the support is evident and produces results, the positive ratings show a marked increase; whenever it is unclear, conspiracy theories abound and anti-Americanism increases. This trend started with the First Gulf War and increased during and after the Second Gulf War in 2003. Conspiracy theories about possible U.S. support to the PKK - in its desire to keep northern Iraq stable - created increasing anti-American sentiment in Turkey. In late 2007, however, this showed a notable positive shift after then-President Bush declared that the PKK was "an enemy of the U.S." and pledged to provide "actionable intelligence" to Turkey, a promise with which it followed through.

With the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq at the end of 2011, will the U.S. continue its support Turkey against the PKK, or will it be distracted with its own priorities in the Middle East and Afghanistan? In the long run, there are several reasons that it is in the U.S.' interest to continue to actively support to Turkey against the PKK. First, the PKK threatens the stability of both Turkey and Iraq. Second, Turkish bases, Incirlik Air Base in particular, are an important hub for the U.S. for

transporting supplies and personnel to Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a leverage that Turkey can use to limit U.S. operations in the Middle East unless the operations are clearly in Turkey's interests. Third, there has been an alleged PKK-Al-Qaida connection, where the PKK may have acted as a "subcontractor" to Al-Qaida in attacking U.S. assets in Turkey. Fourth, since the PKK is not a militant radical Islamic group, but rather, a militant ethnic nationalist group with no Islamist agenda, U.S. stance against it demonstrates a consistent U.S. response to terrorism of all kinds, not just the radical Islamic kind. This undermines accusations that "the U.S. is waging a war on Islam, not terrorism." Finally, given the direct link between the U.S. stance on this issue and Turkish public perceptions of the U.S., which eventually translate into Turkish foreign policy, supporting Turkey against the PKK is critical to U.S. interests in the Middle East. In fact, the Obama administration has argued that the U.S. relationship with Turkey is "more important than ever," alluding to its role as a rising power in the Middle East and its increasing self-confidence in the region, which could be a useful leverage for the U.S. in its dealings with the Middle East.

Why are Turkish perceptions of the U.S. directly related to the PKK issue, and why should the U.S. should care about this issue? To understand this, we need to take a look at recent history and understand how U.S. policies and priorities in the region have affected Turkey. At times, there has been a divergence of interests between the two countries, bringing the "strategic partnership" into question.

### **First Gulf War, 1990-1991**

Certain developments that occurred while Turkey was fighting the PKK in the early nineties created suspicion about the U.S. In particular, the way that events unfolded after the 1991 Gulf War led most Turkish generals to believe that the U.S. not only supported the Kurds in northern Iraq, but also helped the PKK. Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) and the no-fly zone was believed to have facilitated the power vacuum created in northern Iraq, creating a safe haven for the PKK there, enabling their terrorist campaigns since then. These campaigns, which have resulted in the loss of over 40,000 people, continue today. Turks believed that one of the consequences of the Gulf War was the creation of a semi-autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq.

Despite these perceptions, the U.S. has maintained that the PKK is a "terrorist organization" that frequently kills noncombatants, village officials, teachers and even Kurds. U.S. officials also focus on the criminal nature of the PKK, looking at its crimes, murder, narcotics trafficking, extortion, robbery, and trafficking in illegal immigrants. They view the PKK not only as a terrorist organization, but also a criminal organization and argue that it must be dealt with accordingly, by cutting off their funding sources. In fact, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has indicated that the U.S. would like to offer Turkey even more help with equipment and intelligence to combat the PKK. The U.S. has also urged northern Iraq to do its share in curbing the PKK's activities. Unfortunately, because these efforts are not widely known in Turkey, promoting them would help U.S. popularity there.

### **Decapitating the Organization, the Capture of Öcalan, 1999**

One commonly-known U.S. support for Turkey on the PKK issue is its help in capturing Abdullah Öcalan, the group's leader, in 1999. Öcalan was enjoying sanctuary in Syria before Turkey forced Syria to expel him in October 1998. The U.S. strongly backed Turkey and also pressured Syria to expel him. The U.S. denounced Öcalan as a terrorist, and pressured any other state in which he applied for refuge to extradite him to Turkey for trial. Öcalan was finally captured in the Greek Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, thanks to U.S. intelligence, which had pinpointed his location.

### **Second Gulf War and the Questioning of the 'Strategic Partnership,' 2003-2007**

Turkey refrained from getting involved in the Second Gulf War due to its parliamentary decision on 1

March 2003, refusing to allow U.S. troops to pass through Turkish territory to enter Iraq. Turkish generals believed that the absence of Turkish involvement in the Second Gulf War cemented the formation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, paving the way for an independent, autonomous formation, under the protection of the U.S. Turkey feared that a U.S. operation relying on Iraqi Kurds might empower the Kurds even more in their quest for an independent Kurdish state and ignite Kurdish secessionist movements in Turkey as well. They dreaded the possibility that Iraq's Kurds, with the U.S.' tacit blessing, would exploit the turmoil that could follow an Iraqi defeat by setting up their own independent state in the portion of northern Iraq that had remained under their control since the end of 1991 Gulf War, adding territory from Turkey, Iran and Syria to become a "Greater Kurdistan." Such a development would strengthen the PKK and create a dangerous threat to Turkey's security and territorial integrity.

The most important reasons for this mistrust had to do with perceived U.S. support of Kurdish leaders Barzani and Talabani against Turkey and perceived U.S. support for the PKK. The "Suleimaniya" or "Hood incident" significantly added to these suspicions. This incident took place on 4 July 2003, when U.S. troops raided the Turkish military's liaison office in Suleimaniya, Iraq and placed hoods on Turkish Special Forces soldiers, detaining them under harsh conditions for days. This was based on faulty intelligence reports that the Turkish team was preparing to assassinate the Governor of Kirkuk. The Turkish military continues to see this incident as one of the most serious blows to Turkish-American relations and to Turkish pride, and one which Turkey will never forget.

This ignited conspiracy theories about the U.S.' "Greater Middle East Project," which included plans to create in the region loyal allies whom the U.S. could control. Therefore, a U.S.-controlled independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq was consistent with U.S. national interests.

This went against all Turkish expectations of U.S. support to Turkey on the issue. At the time, when asked about the effects of this issue on U.S.-Turkish relations, then Turkish Chief of the General Staff Büyükanıt [stated](#) "We have a very long history with the U.S. Turkey deserves much more support on the issue of the PKK. So far, it has not received it." A 2005 [study](#) by the International Strategic Research Organization revealed that 74% of Turks considered the PKK presence in northern Iraq the "thorniest problem" in U.S.-Turkish relations.

Following a period of increasing PKK attacks in Turkey starting in March 2006, Turkey was questioning the strategic partnership between the two countries. Turkish media and the entire political spectrum expressed even more concern over the reality that the U.S. and Turkey had diverging security interests, undermining any "strategic partnership." They argued that the U.S. had implicitly sided with the PKK by not taking action to support Turkey's attempts to prevent the group from launching attacks on Turkey from bases in northern Iraq. It [appeared](#) that on the issue of northern Iraq the national interests of Turkey and the U.S. were in conflict.

The commonly [cited](#) disappointment was that, "In order to fulfill our international duty against terror, we served in Afghanistan and still do. We also served in Somalia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. But this is not being reciprocated." As such, Turks were [claiming](#) that, while Turkey was partner to U.S. strategy against terrorism, the U.S. was not partner to Turkey's strategy against Turkey's own terrorism. Such assessments of U.S.-Turkey relations were even supplemented with [calls for retaliatory action against the U.S.](#) by restricting the use of a joint air base in Incirlik, an important hub for materials flown in for American and allied troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In this atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion it did not help that reports surfaced about the U.S. providing weapons to the PKK. In the summer of 2007 the Turkish media reported that U.S.-made weapons were

found in the possession of the PKK. The situation became public after PKK deserters claimed that U.S. trucks delivered weapons to their camps in the Qandil Mountains. The Turkish press gave detailed accounts of PKK assertions of U.S. vehicles bringing weapons to PKK camps, including remote-controlled land mines from northern Iraq. **According to one PKK member**, “American soldiers brought M-16 long rifles and various equipment to the organization with their trucks. All the explosives [that the organization uses] are being brought into Turkey from Iraq.” (**U.S. officials declared that** it was not their policy to arm the PKK, which it considered a terrorist organization, and suggested that the weapons had been stolen, lost, or smuggled into Turkey after being sold in Iraq’s black market.)

These allegations once again fueled the general opinion that one of Turkey’s main allies, the United States, was supporting a major threat to Turkish security. A German Marshall Fund study entitled **“Transatlantic Trends”** indicated that the U.S. was “losing the hearts and minds of a vital ally, while it was busy trying to win the hearts and minds of others.”

The **sentiment** was that, no matter how the weapons had arrived in PKK hands, the bottom line was that American-provided weapons were killing Turkish soldiers and civilians. With every funeral of a Turkish soldier who died from a PKK landmine or attack, the Turkish public cursed not only the PKK, but also the U.S. The public billed each PKK murder to the U.S. Polling results time and again gave further credence to these sentiments. These reports were again consistent with a June 2007 **study** by the Pew Research Center, which found that 83% of Turks had an unfavorable view of the U.S. The German Marshall Fund **study** on transatlantic trends also revealed that only 35% of Turks believed that NATO was still important for Turkish national security, indicating that Turks were feeling increasingly isolated in their fight against terrorism.

### **A Significant Turn, November 2007**

All this seemed to show a promising shift following the 5 November 2007 meeting between then-President Bush and Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan, in which the two leaders discussed cooperation against the PKK (Figure 1). The three main results of the meeting were that the U.S. agreed to provide “actionable intelligence” to help Turkish troops locate and attack PKK targets; the two leaders agreed to establish a tripartite military arrangement between Turkey, Iraq, and the U.S. to cooperate against the PKK; and **President Bush declared** that the PKK was a terrorist organization and “an enemy of Turkey, Iraq, and the U.S.” The meeting prevented a crisis in U.S.-Turkey relations at a time when Turks were questioning the U.S.-Turkish strategic partnership. Some even interpreted Bush’s statement as tacit approval or a “green light” for a Turkish cross-border operation against PKK camps in northern Iraq, which Turkey had indicated an intention to pursue. The meeting proved to be a milestone in getting relations back on track.

By January 2008 Turks were hailing the revival of the U.S.-Turkish strategic partnership and Turkish public perceptions of the U.S. showed a significant improvement. The generals cautiously hailed this cooperation as the beginnings of a U.S.-Turkish strategic partnership revival. Skeptics who had previously floated ideas of retaliatory action, such as limiting our use of the Incirlik Air Base, also changed their assessment of the situation.

Within two months of this meeting Turkey had **conducted** four cross-border operations against PKK camps, starting on 16 December 2007 (Figure 2). In February 2008, with help from U.S. intelligence, Turkish troops also conducted a military incursion into northern Iraq. Following the first round of operations, Army General Yaşar Büyükanıt, then-Chief of the Turkish General Staff, **told** Turkish mainstream Kanal D television on 17 December that the precision strikes were, in part, based on “intelligence provided by the U.S.” Turkish President Abdullah Gül has also **expressed** that “We [Turkey

and the U.S.] are sharing intelligence. Our cooperation suits that of allies. Both sides are happy.”

It was remarkable how fast the negative image of the U.S. began to **change** in Turkey once such cooperation against the PKK took place. This was hardly surprising, since a crucial part of Turkish anti-Americanism was fueled by the perception that the U.S. was “protecting” the PKK against Ankara. Thus, Turkish-American relations, which had broken off with the 1 March 2003 motion of the Turkish parliament refusing U.S. use of Turkish territory to enter Iraq, and which later had hit rock bottom, **entered a period of normalization**. U.S. assistance immediately affected Turkish public opinion of the U.S., which started **moving** in the right direction.

### **Concerns Regarding American Plans to Leave Iraq, 2009-2011**

Following the Iraqi parliament’s ratification of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the U.S. and Iraq in November 2008, eventual U.S. withdrawal from Iraq started to create concern about Turkey’s ability to contain the PKK. This time, Turkey was worried that the eventual departure of U.S. forces would exacerbate security problems in Iraq and give the outlawed terrorist organization a freer hand to attack Turkey. The **SOFA** set a course for a new relationship between the U.S. and Iraq and established a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraqi cities by 30 June 2009, and for all troops to leave the country by the end of 2011.

Turkish military officials were now concerned that the departure of U.S. troops would mark the end of Turkey’s ability to conduct cross-border operations against PKK camps in northern Iraq. The November 2007 meeting between Bush and Erdoğan, during which the public perceived a “green light” by the U.S. to conduct these, would be subject to Iraqi government approval. Turkey **feared** that operations would become more and more difficult as Iraq would seek to further consolidate its territorial sovereignty. In 2008 alone Turkey had conducted 30 air strikes against PKK targets in northern Iraq, and even some cross-border land operations. Ankara’s fears were the same: following the U.S. withdrawal from Turkey a power vacuum would emerge in Iraq, causing sectarian and ethnic clashes that could spill over into Turkey. The various problems between different groups in Iraq, including between Shi’a and Sunnis and the Arabs and Kurds, could be magnified once the U.S. pulled out of Iraq. If Iraq did not achieve an internal balance, Turkey would not be spared from the turmoil of the Iraqi internal problems.

It was also disturbing that Iraqi air space would be under the control of the Iraqi government as of 1 January 2009, when the SOFA would take effect. Another fear was that the U.S. would cease to provide intelligence regarding PKK activities, which the Turkish public had perceived to be critical in fighting the PKK. Without daily satellite monitoring, it would be difficult for Turkey to follow PKK elements’ activities, their internal fights, and where and how they were getting support.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan raised Turkey’s concerns with President Obama’s (then President-elect) staff on a trip to the U.S. in which he **warned** that the withdrawal should be carefully planned. Shortly before the withdrawal, in the fall of 2011, the PKK carried out several coordinated and deadly attacks killing tens of Turkish soldiers; and resulting in Turkish military stepping up its operations on both sides of the Turkish-Iraqi border. Meanwhile, Turkish government officials have made an effort to improve relations with the Iraqi leadership and work directly with them on the PKK issue. In a positive development, the Kurdish Regional Government has **called** on the PKK to lay down its arms.

The U.S.’s post-withdrawal plans have been promising. In October 2011, the U.S. **voiced plans** to sell three new Super Cobra attack helicopters to Turkey, for use against the PKK. In addition, it redeployed four Predator drones to Turkey from northern Iraq. The drones are seen as a key weapon for the Turkish Armed Forces in fighting the PKK. Enabling and improving Turkey’s capability for self-defense, modernization and regional security are important not just against the PKK; but also as a way to empower



a regional Muslim ally to help influence the Arab countries in a volatile Middle East.

## Conclusion

Since the U.S. has withdrawn its troops from Iraq, the obvious question has risen about whether the U.S. should or could continue to support Turkey's efforts against the PKK, in view of other U.S. priorities such as Afghanistan, Iran, and the 'Arab Spring'? The answer is yes, because it is the most important factor shaping U.S. military relations with Turkey today. It is critical for public perceptions in Turkey of the U.S., which translates directly into U.S. relations with that country, use of the Incirlik base, and stability in Iraq and Turkey. Wiping out the PKK is in the direct interest of the U.S. as well: U.S. assets in Turkey may have been, and continue to be, a target by a PKK, which is being used as a "proxy" of Al-Qaida. It has been **alleged** that the November 2008 bombing of the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul was carried out by the PKK in that role (Figure 3). Though the two groups are not ideologically aligned, a common enmity against Turkey suggests a possible basis for cooperation. There have been **theories** about a connection or cross-pollination between the PKK and Al-Qaida's predominantly Kurdish ally, Ansar al-Islam, who has also sought refuge in northern Iraq in the past. Al-Qaida may have courted the PKK to exploit their knowledge of Turkish security vulnerabilities in attacking U.S. targets.

Finally, at a time when Al Qaida's propaganda includes accusing America of waging a "War on Islam," U.S. support to Turkey against the PKK undermines such arguments, demonstrating a consistent response to terrorism of all kinds, not just the radical Islamic. It is important that the U.S. not only continues its efforts, but also promotes them in Turkey and beyond.

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